Program Notes

String Quartet No. 6 in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born: 1770
Died: 1827
Composed: 1798–1800

I. Allegro con brio
II. Adagio ma non troppo
III. Scherzo. Allegro
IV. La Malinconia. Adagio — Allegretto quasi allegro

Beethoven worked for two years on his first string quartets, completing that cycle of six in 1800, the year he also composed his First Symphony. While the quartets were not composed in the order they were published, the sixth of the set was in fact the last to be written, and it shows a number of unusual features. This is a quartet that grows more interesting as it proceeds–Beethoven was apparently experimenting here with making the finale a weightier and more significant conclusion than the usual high-spirited rondo of classical form.

Such a shift in emphasis inevitably means that the first movement–which establishes the character of a piece of music–will seem less important, and Philip Radcliffe has called the opening Allegro con brio of this quartet "lightweight" and "superficially Haydnesque." Yet it is hard to dislike this spirited opening movement, with its propulsive exchanges between first violin and cello and its endless energy. The movement is remarkably short–its brevity is one of Beethoven's ways of de-emphasizing its importance–and the development is concerned almost exclusively with the opening theme. The first violin lays out the elegant main melody of the Adagio, ma non troppo (the first violin has an unusually prominent part in this quartet), and this idea develops through a lengthy elaboration. The third movement is a scherzo rather than the minuet of the high-classical string quartet, and this one is full of cross-rhythms, as Beethoven sets three beats against two; the skittering trio belongs almost entirely to the first violin before a quick bridge in B-flat minor leads back to the scherzo.

The finale opens with a long Adagio that Beethoven calls "La Malinconia." The source of this melancholy is unclear. It does not seem to reflect anything in Beethoven's own life–perhaps it is a generalized expression of an emotional pose. The composer stresses that it should be played "with the greatest delicacy," and this remarkable music proceeds through unexpected modulations and sharp dynamic contrasts before leading without pause into the sparkling main section of the finale, marked Allegretto quasi Allegro. This music, in a quick 3/8 meter, has some of the feel of a waltz, and once again the first violin does most of the dancing. Beethoven brings back several reminiscences of "La Malinconia" near the close, but the music finally dashes to its close on the sunny waltz music, now accelerated to a Prestissimo.

String Quartet No. 2, Intimate Letters
LEOŠ JANÁČEK
Born: 1854
Died: 1928
Composed: 1928

I. Andante — Con moto — Allegro
II. Adagio — Vivace
III. Moderato — Andante — Adagio
IV. Allegro — Andante — Adagio

In the summer of 1917 Leoš Janáček, a 63-year-old composer little known outside his homeland, met Kamila Stösslová, a 25-year-old married woman with a small child, and fell madly in love. Over the final eleven years of his life, she was the inspiration for a volcanic outpouring of masterpieces by the aging composer: four operas, two string quartets, a mass, tremendous orchestral works, and numerous choral and chamber pieces–as well as 600 letters written to her. Janáček's love for Kamilla Stösslová was entirely platonic–and one-sided. Mystified by the composer's passion, she responded with affectionate friendship and encouragement, content to serve as muse for a creator she did not fully understand (Kamila was lucky to have an understanding husband–Janáček had a furiously jealous wife).

Program Notes

Janáček said that all his late works were, at some level, an expression of his love for Kamila, and one piece made that love explicit. During the winter of 1928, he took three weeks (January 29-February 19) off from work on his opera *From the House of the Dead* to compose his String Quartet No. 2, which he subtitled "Intimate Letters." Janáček's original nickname for the quartet had been "Love Letters," but he decided against that, telling Kamila that he did not want "to deliver [his] feelings up to the discretion of stupid people." To underline the latent meaning of the quartet, he at first intended to replace the viola with the viola d'amore; when the older instrument proved to have insufficient power, he returned to the modern viola, which is given a very prominent role in this quartet.

Janáček noted that each movement had a particular program. The opening movement was inspired by his first meeting Kamila at the Luhačovice Spa during the summer of 1917; the second depicts events of that summer; the third he described as "gay, but melting into a vision of you"; the last expressed Janáček's "fear for you—however it eventually sounds not as fear, but as longing and its fulfillment." After hearing a private performance of the first two movements, the exultant composer wrote: "Kamila, it will be beautiful, strange, unrestrained, inspired, a composition beyond all the usual conventions! Together, I think that we'll triumph! It's my first composition that sprang from directly experienced feeling. Before then I composed only from things remembered; this piece, 'Intimate Letters,' was written in fire."

This passionate, intense music is in Janáček's extremely compressed late style. Themes tend to be short, there are countless abrupt tempo shifts, and the music is tightly unified—even accompaniment figures have thematic importance, and there is some cyclic use of themes. The full-blooded beginning of the Andante gives away suddenly to the true first theme: an eerie, unsettling melody played ponticello by the viola. Janáček said that it reflected Kamila's disquieting arrival in his life. This theme recurs in many forms in this movement, which pitches between the lyric and harshly dramatic. By contrast, the Adagio is based largely on the viola's opening melody; this rises to a climax marked Maestoso before closing over flautato mutterings from viola and second violin. The Moderato begins with a lilting dance in 9/8, followed by a lyrical violin duet. The climax of this movement is a stunner: the music comes to a stop, then the first violin rips out a stabbing entrance on its highest E—marked appassionato, this is an explosive variation of the preceding duet tune. The concluding Allegro, a rondo, gets off to a good-natured start with a theme that sounds as if it might have folk origins (actually it was Janáček's own). Once again, there are frequent mood and tempo changes, and—driven by furious trills and mordants—the music drives to its impassioned close.

The 74-year-old Janáček was very pleased with this music. To Kamila, he wrote that it was "like a piece of living flesh. I don't think I ever shall be able to write anything deeper or more truthful." Six months later, the creator of this passionate music was dead.

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 51, No. 2

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833
Died: 1897
Composed: 1866–1873

I. Allegro non troppo
II. Andante moderato
III. Quasi minuetto, moderato — Allegretto vivace
IV. Finale. Allegro non assai

In one of the most candid admissions in the history of music, Brahms lamented to the conductor Hermann Levi about the strain of having to compose within the shadow of Beethoven: "You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us." This comment is usually taken to refer to the overpowering example of Beethoven's symphonies, but Brahms was just as haunted by the prospect of composing string quartets, and in that form he had to confront not one, but a number of giants from the past. Brahms was all too aware of the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart,

Beethoven, and Schubert, and he knew that any quartet he wrote would be judged against the achievement of those four masters. Brahms tried to write quartets for years, but he was the most self-critical of composers, and he said that he had written and destroyed at least twenty quartets before he wrote two he liked well enough to publish in 1873 as his Opus 51. One of his friends reported seeing sketches for these quartets as early as 1859, which means that Brahms had worked on them for fourteen years before he felt they were finished.

After his long delay in writing a symphony, Brahms wrote a stormy and impassioned First Symphony in C minor, then quickly followed it with a lyric and expansive Second. The situation is somewhat similar with the two quartets of Opus 51: the dark Quartet in C Minor was followed by the more relaxed Quartet in A Minor. It was as if Brahms's opening work in a form needed to be a clenched confrontation in which he could attack the form and make it his own, and only then could he relax and write a sunnier work in the same form.

That said, however, it must be noted that Quartet in A Minor is marked by the same concentration of materials and motivic development that animated its predecessor, and much of this quartet grows directly out of the first violin's opening theme. Brahms intended this quartet for his friend Joseph Joachim, and he incorporated Joachim's personal motto "Frei aber einsam" ("Free but lonely") in the notes F-A-E that shape the opening theme. In addition, the three rising eighth-notes that appear innocently in the fourth measure of this theme will return in various forms here and in subsequent movements. But the quartet is not an exercise in crabbed motivic manipulation, and Brahms supplies a second subject that simply glows: it is a long duet for the violins, and he marks it dolce ("sweet"), lusingando ("charming, coaxing"), and mezza voce ("half voice"). From these contrasted materials, he builds an extended sonata-form movement that concludes on evocations of Joachim's motto. The Andante moderato takes the shape of its main theme from that innocent figure from the very beginning. Most striking here is the duet of first violin and cello at the center: over buzzing tremolos from the middle voices they sing in close canon before the movement closes on a return of the opening material.

In the third movement, Brahms bends traditional minuet form for his own purposes. He calls this movement a "quasi-minuet." Rather than building it on the standard minuet-and-trio form, Brahms presents a lilting, ghostly minuet, then contrasts it with two sections—marked Allegretto vivace—where the music suddenly flashes ahead on a steady patter of sixteenth-notes, only to rein back to resume the more stately minuet tempo.

Many have heard the influence of Hungarian music in the finale, with the first violin exemplifying vigorous, strongly inflected, dance-like melodies. Perhaps this writing, in a quartet intended for Joseph Joachim, is a nod to the violinist's Hungarian background. The movement is in sonata-rondo form: the theme introduced by the first violin is full of energy and snap, and it recurs throughout, subtly evolving with each return. Brahms drives this wild dance to its close with a Più vivace coda.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger